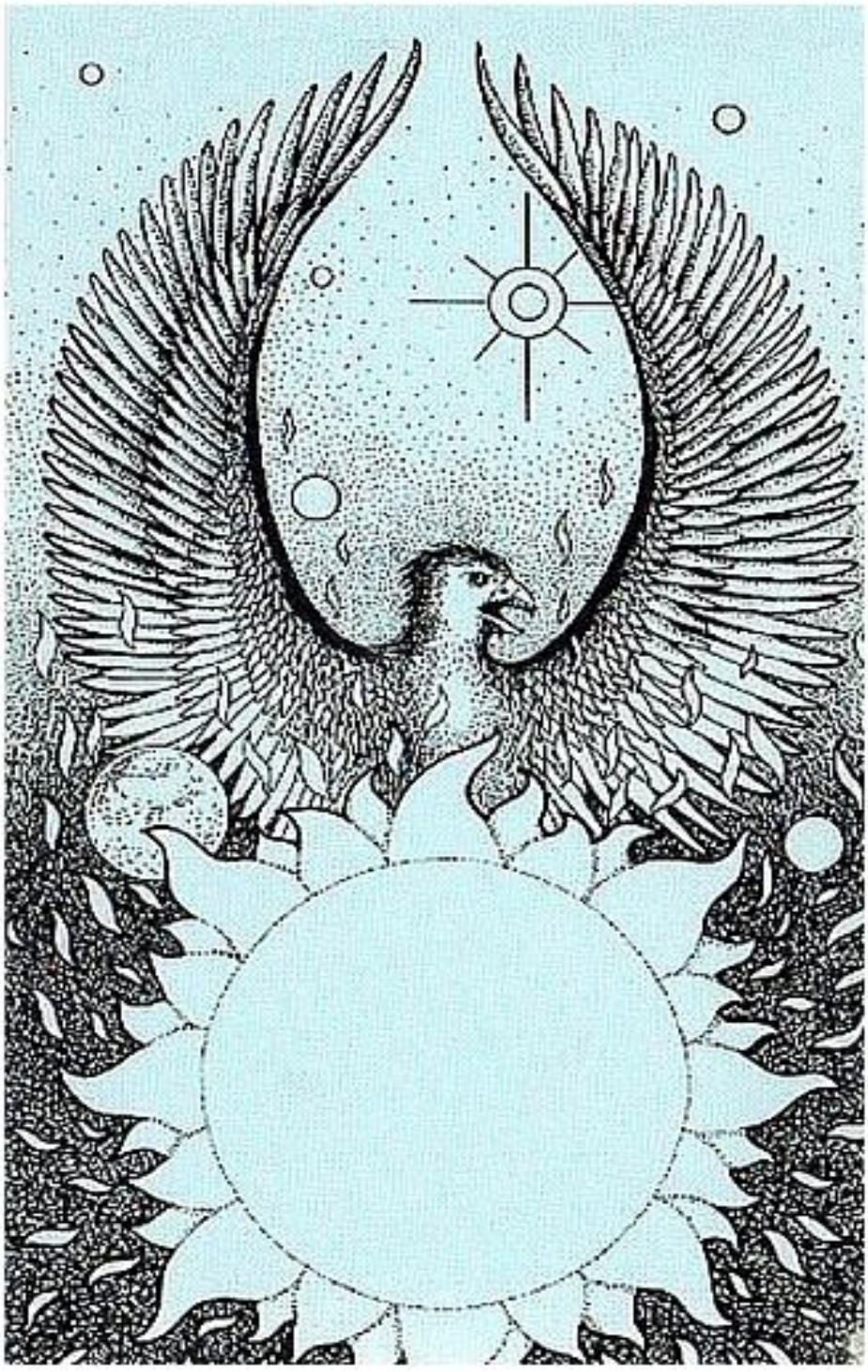
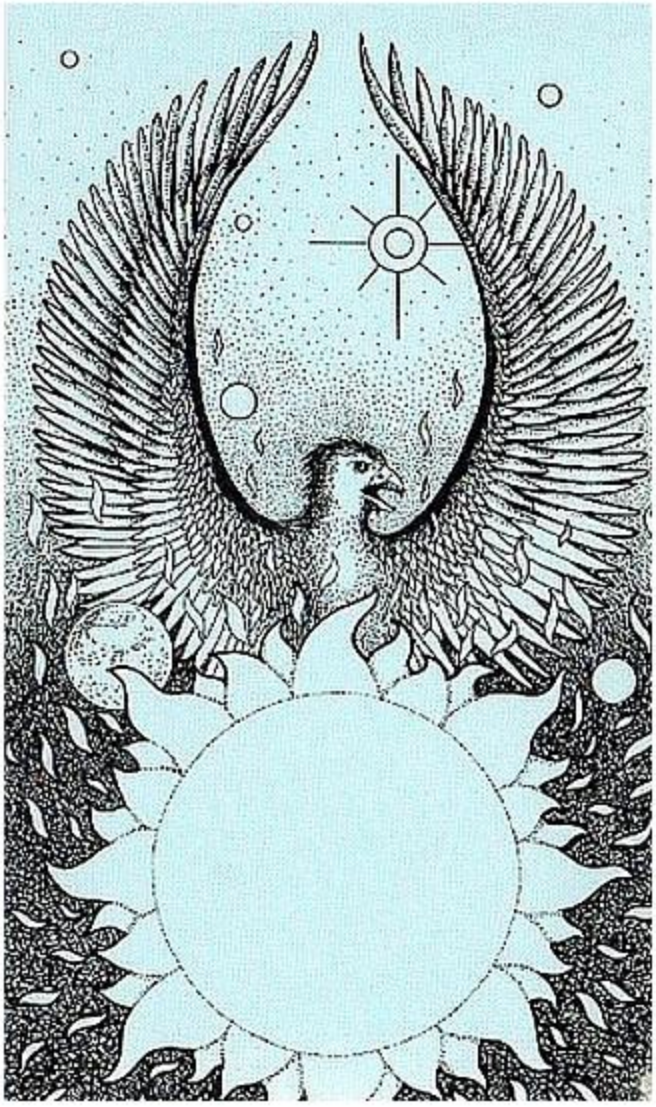
Poul Anderson

The OLD PHOENIX Tavern



Poul Anderson

The OLD PHOENIX Tavern



The OLD PHOENIX Tavern

~~oOo~~

A Midsummer Tempest
Doubleday May 1974
~chapters XI, XII & epilogue~

House Rule
Homebrew - NESFA Press Feb 1976

Losers' Night
Pulphouse Short Story Paperbacks #1 Jan 1991

Visitors to the Old Phoenix *have wandered in from:*
Three Hearts and Three Lions *(Holger Carlsen)*
A Midsummer Tempest *(Princed Rupert)*
Operation Otherworld *(Valeria Matucheck)*
The **Nicholas Van Rijn** stories *(who else?)*

The OLD PHOENIX Tavern

Table of Contents

A Midsummer Tempest
(excerpts)

House Rule

Loser's Night

24404/$1.50
BALLANTINE BOOKS
SF
A brilliant new novel by
POUL ANDERSON
A Midsummer Tempest

A MIDSUMMER TEMPEST

XI - THE TAPROOM OF THE OLD PHOENIX

Will closed the door behind himself, barring every hint of storm. Windows likewise were tightly shuttered.The men kept right hands at hover near sword hilts and glared about.

But the chamber was altogether peaceful. Indeed, the strangest thing was its homelikeness. It might be somewhat wider than was common for a country inn, but if so, that was not by much. Massive ceiling beams, subtle-grained oak in floor and wainscots, long central board and benches, a few small tables with straight-backed seats, were familiar. In a handsome stone fireplace a blaze danced to its own merry boom and crackle, casting forth pinewood fragrance as well as warmth, flanked by several armchairs which were intricately carved and ivory-inlaid but whose cushions had plainly comforted many a body over the years.

The contents of the room were perhaps more unusual, as if sailor patrons had brought gifts from a whole world. Upon the mantel rested a giant hourglass and two seven-branched candlesticks of twining brass. The light from these was joined by that from tapers sconced around the walls. Their gleam picked out a number of pictures whose kinds, styles, and subjects made a somehow harmonious turmoil. On the right side stretched a mahogany bar with a brass footrail and surprisingly up-to-date beer pumps, guarding racks of bottles and drinking vessels. A nearby door must lead to the kitchen, since lingering savorinesses drifted thence. In the adjacent wall, opposite the entrance, another opening gave on a corridor and staircase. Beside this lifted a high, crammed set of book-shelves. Next to it, a desk held writing materials and two globes.

Rupert’s glance gulped the setting as it hunted the persons. They were not many: a barmaid, a man and woman seated at the fire, another couple at one of the little tables. Their conversations chopped off when the Cavaliers appeared. Yet the regard they gave was neither hostile nor wary; it was frankly curious.

The man by the hearth sprang erect and hurried toward the latest arrivals. “Good eventide, good sirs. Be very welcome,” he greeted. His voice was deep and rich, bearing a trace of West country accent.

Rupert looked hard at him. “You’re the … proprietor … of this Old Phoenix?” he asked.

The man nodded. “What may your wishes be?” He raised a palm, smiling. “Nay, let me guess. Ye’ve fared through rain, in striving and distress. A bath, dry garb, hot food, a cup of cheer, a bed, then breakfast, ere you go from here.”

Still Rupert considered him. While more quick on his feet than most, he was stocky beneath an overlay of plumpness. His face was round, rosy, snub-nosed, brown eyes a-twinkle, chin clean-shaven; only his complete baldness made it memorable. His garb was equally nondescript, though of superior material. Yet something about him breathed an air at least of Puck.

“Our purse is lean,” Rupert warned.

The landlord made a dismissing wave. “We take no money here.” At their astonishment, he laughed. “If Faerie gold turns into autumn leaves in mortal wallets, what’s your gold to us?”

Rupert stiffened. “This is a kittle place we’ve blundered into,” he told Will under his breath.

“But friendly,” replied the dragoon, now standing almost at ease.

“Aye, to those who seek us out,” the landlord said. “Fear never paying such unholy price as might be taken in the Venusberg. My sole reward for hospitality is meeting folk like you, within whom burn the stars of many worlds and destinies. I love to watch them meet and hear them yarn.” Seriously: “Indeed, I may not really touch their lives. Methinks, for instance, ye’ve escaped some peril. Well, ye could not have come upon this house had there not been another refuge for you.”

“A brook an’ treetop,” Will nodded. “Me, I’ll choose your bed.” To Rupert: “Fear not. It war *her* toaken led us heare.”

The prince shook himself. “Aye.” With a stiff grin: “Maybe I’ll grow used to trollery.” To the landlord: “I thank you much, and offer you our names. I am Prince Rupert, exile from the Rhine, and this my comrade is Will Fairweather.”

The other bowed. “I’ve many names,” he answered. “Let you say Taverner. Now follow me upstairs. Hot water waits, soap, towels, grooming gear, and change of clothes. Ye must return them when ye leave tomorrow; yours will be ready, clean and dry and mended. We’ve eaten here, but you’ll be brought roast beef and what pertains to it, to dine at

ease while settling privately what your desires are. A room is fitted for each one of you. I hope your wish will not be ‘Straight to bed.’ ‘

“Nay, we’ll return”—Rupert gave a salute of courtesy to the rest who were present—”and make acquaintances.”

As Taverner led them out, past the bar, Will half choked and Rupert himself broke stride. That was not due to the woman behind the counter; chubby, cheerful, gray hair in a bun, she was like a female version of the landlord, and might well be his wife since she wore a wedding band. But from here, one got a direct view of the hearth.

“Thic wench in yonder armchair,” Will whispered. “Hoo, hoo, hoo!”

“Whoe’er she is, she’s not for likes of thee,” Rupert cautioned.

Taverner might have heard, since he remarked over his shoulder: “Ye’ll find your fellow guests tonight forthcoming. We get some surly ones; but mostly not. Here all alike are far beyond their worlds, and none may leave by any other door than that where through he entered, nor bear off much more than rest and cheer and memories. Thus, in a way, whatever happens here has not quite fully happened. That’s a freedom whereof no few avail themselves. Pray, come.”

The three departed from the chamber.

The man at the table, who had sat clutching a tankard while he observed, brought it to his lips for a mighty draught. “Aah!” he said. *“Det gaar godt.”* He addressed the young woman opposite him with a slight lilt. “Who might those fellows be?”

“I don’t know.” Like him, she spoke an English never native to England, though with a different accent. “They look kind of Renaissance? Except I didn’t think people grew that big in those days. The dark one’s just about your size and build.”

Her companion was in truth huge. His face was good-looking if not extraordinary, save for a slightly dented nose; his yellow hair was cut short and he went beardless. He wore trousers and open-necked shirt of stout brown cloth, boots cobbled for rough use. “Well,” he said, “things may not be the same in their world. Though, uh, actually, in my own time-line—I mean the one I started out from, this trip—giants did exist now and then, ‘way back in the Middle Ages. Like King Harald Haardraade of Norway, who died in 1066 trying to conquer England one jump ahead of the Normans. He stood seven feet high.”

“Then no doubt the same was true in my history,” she answered. “They’re so similar, yours and mine, maybe identical till, m-m, didn’t we decide about 1900?”

“I tell you, I don’t belong where I came from.”

She patted his hand. “I know. Take it easy, Holger. I am trying to help you.” She was a winsome lass, tall, slender, features pert, eyes blue as the man’s. Ruddy-brown locks fell past her ears. Her garb was a feminine, green version of his. On the left breast shone a silver pin in the form of an owl.

“If we had more time!” he said. “What can I learn in a night?”

“Well, we don’t. I’ll simply have to cram what I can into that square head of yours, before Mister Boniface politely but firmly sends us on our separate ways.”

“*Why* can one only spend a night per visit?”

“Isn’t it obvious? Anything more, and there might be too decisive an interaction. This is neutral ground.” The girl drew breath. “Suppose, oh, suppose I happened to meet Abe Lincoln here—I’m sure he’s eligible, whether or not he ever actually did find his way to a door—well, given a lot of time together, I probably couldn’t resist warning him against Ford’s Theater. Lord knows what that might do to his world. Make a new continuum? I’m not sure if that’s possible. However, I am sure that nobody less than God has the wisdom for it. I suspect we’re bending the rules already, you and I.”

“You’re very kind,” he said.

“Nuts! I’m having fun.” She sipped from her glass of wine. “But look, when those two guys come back, I’ll want to talk with them. After all, I am on an exploratory project. So let’s get as much done as we can until then.” She stood up. He made to. do the same. She gestured him off. “Stay put. I’m going to see if anything helpful is on the bookshelf over there.”

She crossed the room with a limber stride. Holger settled down to his beer. The woman in the armchair leaned forward. His glance crossed hers, and locked.

With sheer material, trim, jewelry and other accessories, she had turned what was supposed to be a decorous stola into something spectacular. The sumptuousness beneath her clothing made this irrelevant to any normal male. She ran fingers through midnight tresses and gave him a smoldering smile.

“Damn,” he lamented, “I wish I could talk to you.”

She crooned, to be heard only by him: *“Da mi basia mille.”*

“Det var som Fanden! I’ve forgotten practically all the Latin I ever had, except for church.” Slowly: “However, is language required?”

He half rose. His erstwhile partner saw, and called: “Hey, take it easy, lover boy. Sex and mathematics don’t mix. Or hadn’t you heard?”

“Oh, well, look here, Valeria, I’m simply trying to be polite—”

“Yah, I know that kind of politeness. And you told me you’re seeking your own true sweetheart. Do you or don’t you want some how-to instruction?”

“Sure.” Holger slumped. His sheepish glance at the other woman got a return both sullen and sultry. He fumbled for pipe and tobacco pouch.

Valeria ran her eyes over the books. They were as various in titles as in size and binding. Her fingers stroked the celestial globe on the desk beside. The terrestrial sphere was equally detailed, marking in special colors places like Atlantis and Huy Braseal.

The landlord re-entered. Approaching Holger, he asked, *“Vil Herren ikke gerne ha' et Krus til?”*

“Jo, Tak,” the big man said; then: “Why talk Danish? Yes, thanks, I would like more beer, Herr Kromand. I’ve never had better.”

“Quite a compliment from your nationality,” beamed the landlord. His English changed accent again as he raised his voice. “I say, pet, the gentleman ‘ere needs another pint of the dark.”

“Coming right along, duck,” the barmaid answered. She pattered to fetch Holger’s tankard and fill it afresh.

“Would you care for a drink yourselves?” the Dane asked them both.

“Aow thanks, sir, but I got me place to tend,” said the barmaid. “Might draw meself a mild-and bitter, though.”

“And I’ve me own ’ostly duties,” the landlord added. “The poor lady over there ain’t got anybody else ‘ere tonight what can talk with her. Besides, I think you’re busy. You come join us when you can, what?”

He sought the woman by the hearth, resumed his chair, lifted his goblet to hers, and proceeded in their conversation.

“Hey!” Valeria warbled. “Yippee! Here we are— Sokolnikoff, *Introduction to Paratemporal Mathematics.”* She took a closer look. “And, yeah, right beside it, the *Handbook of Alchemy and Metaphysics,* so I don’t

even have to go upstairs for my copy." She grabbed the two volumes, plus paper and pencils off the desk.

Back by Holger, she drew her chair close to his and sat down. "Now, look," she told him, "I can't teach you everything they've learned in my world. Anyhow, I don't claim to understand more than the elements myself. And even our experts still have some pretty large areas of ignorance. But the theorems I do know let me cross from continuum to continuum, with a fair probability of landing in whichever one I want, or a reasonable facsimile of it. I even deduced there had to be an interuniversal nexus. That's how I found the Old Phoenix. You did it by accident, didn't you?"

"Well," he said defensively, "at least I have been traveling too."

"Yah!" she gibed. "Using the spells from that superstition-riddled medieval grimoire you located— an unguided missal if ever I saw one. You could hunt through the time-lines till you died of old age, in its random style. Or no, not that long: till you met something too tough and smart and mean. Had several narrow squeaks already, haven't you?" She tapped a book. "Okay. You did once take an engineering degree. You should appreciate a systematic treatment. You may get a glimmering of how to cast a transportation spell that has a better-than-chance likelihood of taking you where you would want to go." She sighed. "I hope, for openers, you've got the wit to grasp the fundamental ideas of the transcendental calculus, because that's how we prove the theorems you'll need, and without understanding, you can't get any good out of them."

Holger reached for the volume. "Please explain," he said meekly. "You shouldn't take all this trouble for a stranger."

"Aw, hell, I like you, man." Valeria started to talk and draw diagrams. The other woman chatted with Taverner-Boniface-Kromand, though her attention kept straying. The barmaid waited in amiable patience.

XII - LATER

Rupert and Will came into the taproom, cleansed, remarkably refreshed, the former regal, the latter gawky in robes of timeless cut but many colors. They paused at the entrance. Rupert's glance was caught by a picture unlike most of the portraits, landscapes, and action scenes around: a colored print of a glossy kind new to him, eerily beautiful in its vista of a

starry night wherein floated a banded silvery globe encompassed by shimmering rings.

The landlord beckoned. “Ah, welcome, guests,” he hailed. “Come take your ease and drink. What is your pleasure?”

“Beer!” said the two like a single mouth.

The landlord chuckled. “I thought ’twould be.”

Rupert led the way to the hearth. “You’re far too kind, good Master Taverner,” he said.

“Nay, Highness, I’m a fat and cunning spider, albeit male, which weaves a subtle web bedewed with ale and wine and stronger waters, and thus ensnares a singing swarm of lives, to batten on the fables that they bear.” The landlord waved at armchairs. “Do join us. Oh, but first I must present you.” He spoke to the woman, with an appropriate gesture: *“Rupertus, filius comitis palatini Rheni, et Guillermus, miles et famulus suus,”* To the men: “And this is Clodia Pulcher, come from Rome.”

Will leered at her. Rupert was dumfounded. “That Clodia—Catullus’ Lesbia?” he faltered. (His host nodded.) “But she is dead these sixteen hundred years!”

“Not in the world that is her own, my lord. And here may come, from every time and clime, aye, every cranny of reality, whoever finds a way to find the door and brings uncommon tales wherewith to pay.” Taverner winked. “She is an often guest, our Clodia: tonight in disappointment growing sulky till your arrival. Sit ye, sirs, I pray.”

Rupert curbed himself, bowed over the woman’s hand, kissed it, and greeted her: *“Salve, domina; ad servitium tuum.”*

She beamed and purred in reply, *“Oh! Loqueris latine?”*

Rupert shrugged. *“Aliquantulum, domina.”* Too bemused to struggle further with the language, especially when his pronunciation and, no doubt, grammar were so unlike hers, he settled his great frame beside the landlord’s.

The barmaid arrived with two brimful tankards. She curtsied as she handed one to Rupert, saying, “Here’s for your Highness.” Giving Will the other, she added more casually, “And the same for thee. I hope ‘twill smack you well.”

“I thank thee, goodwife,” said Rupert absently.

Will picked a chair next to Clodia’s, though her attention remained on his master. Goggle-eyed, he little marked what a noble brew he drank.

Valeria nudged Holger. “Let’s join the party for a while,” she suggested.

“I could use a break,” he agreed. “You know, I damn near flunked differential equations in college, and now you spring this stuff on me.”

She threw him a sharp glance. “Look, friend,” she said, “given your background, you ought to know already that God never felt obliged to make the universes easy for us to understand.”

“Or easy in any way,” he sighed. “*Naa, da,* let’s go.” He put pipe in mouth, tankard in fist, and sauntered along.

Clodia, who had been getting no response from Rupert, ignored Valeria but turned the full battery on Holger. He gulped. “Twenty lashes with a wet eyeball,” Valeria muttered. To Rupert and Will: “Good evening, gentlemen.”

The prince rose and bowed; his follower was too rapt. “If you’ll allow self-introduction … lady—” His voice trailed off.

She smiled. “Not used to women in slacks, are you? Sorry. I’m Valeria Matuchek, from the United States of America, if that means anything to you.” She extended her hand. He hung fire a moment, decided there could be no harm in showing her a courtesy to which she might be entitled, and kissed it as he had Clodia’s. “Hey!” she said. “You know, you’re the first man I’ve ever met who could do that with real authority?”

Rupert straightened, to tower above her and reply, “I do not comprehend, fair damosel.”

“Our accents are sort of thick, mutually, aren’t they? You sound a bit like Holger—here, Holger Carlsen, from Denmark, though he’s spent a lot of time in my own country, on a different hyperplane.”

The two big men clasped hands. “I’m Rupert, of the Rhine Palatinate,” the Cavalier said, seeking to establish good relations. “My mother’s mother was a Danish princess—Anne, queen to James of Scotland and of England, two countries which have been close friends with Denmark since days of Hamlet, if not further yet.”

Holger raised brows. “Hamlet?”

Valeria shushed him, urged him into a seat, and took one herself opposite Rupert. “Suppose we swap information,” she advised. “We haven’t got such an awfully long time for that; better headlong than hesitant. You’re from the Rhineland, did you say, Rupert?”

“By right of blood alone—a stuff more thick than water, goes the adage, but too thin to mortar soil in firmness ‘neath my claim,” the prince answered wryly. “At present, as the nephew of King Charles, I’m fighting on his side against revolt. Mine English friend and I were lorn in Wales, beset by Puritans and other dogs, when we got … guidance … to this happy place.”

Valeria sat upright. “Wait a minute! King Charles—Puritans—you mean Roundheads?” (He nodded.) “*When* are you from? I mean, what date would you say it is?”

“Why-y … I’ve lost track of what it is exactly— but August, sixteen hundred forty-four—”

“Ahhh,” she exulted. A slender fist clenched on the arm of her chair. “How much do you know about the situation—parallel universes and all that jazz—Nothing, h’m? Well, look, Rupert, I’m from America. You know America, don’t you? Where I come from, it’s independent countries. And … when I left home, the year was 1974. Holger, there, left in 1950—but not the same 1950 as I was busy being born in.”

Rupert grew most quiet. “This well’s too deep for Will,” complained Fairweather. Turning to Clodia, who was obviously furious that neither Rupert nor Holger paid her any special heed, he added slyly, “And eke for thee?” Her glance crossed his and came to rest.

Taverner leaned back, ankles crossed, fingers bridged, altogether delighted. The fire was burning down. A gnomish figure bustled from the kitchen doorway to lay on more wood. The barmaid took empty vessels with an equal clatter, filled and returned them.

“You’re from tomorrow, then,” Rupert said low, “as Clodia is from the ancient past; and distant lands?”

“Not quite,” Valeria denied. “I’m not sure how well I can get the idea across, but I’ll try. Look, you were born into the world you know. It has such-and-such qualities—geography, astronomy, laws of nature, kinds of life; people, nations, societies; a past, a present, and a future growing out of these, Right?” (Rupert nodded.) “Well, imagine some important event had turned out differently in the past. A battle lost instead of won, that kind of thing. Give me an example.”

Rupert’s bewilderment was yielding to fascination. He cast a look at Holger while he tugged his chin. Finally: “Well, say Prince Hamlet had not died in vengeance, thus making Fortinbras the Danish king, but had,

instead, become the king himself. That dynasty had many English ties. He might have come and helped his kinfolk here to over-throw Macbeth, the Scots usurper. Once planted on the isle, the Danes might next remember King Canute, not long agone, and turn on Norman William when he came. Since Denmark only, of the Northern lands, had cannon then, however primitive—"

"Hvad for Pokker?" burst from Holger.

"Take it easy," Valeria told him. "He's from a different time-line…. I wonder, I wonder—" Fairly aflame with enthusiasm, she leaned forward. "Let's get the theory of this out of the way first, shall we, Rupert?"

Will saw his leader struggle for insight, remarked to Clodia, "I thank tha Loard I war not boarn to think," and clinked his tankard against her wine-glass. She smiled straight at him. He choked, "I ne'er wot one could stagger in a chair."

Valeria was proceeding: "Well, if you can imagine history might have switched onto a different track, take the next step. That is, suppose both outcomes are real. One world where, uh, Hamlet died young; one where he went on to take the Danish crown and stop the Norman conquest. Both happened. Can you accept that?"

"I dare not say what limits God has laid on His creating," Rupert breathed. "But how can this be?"

"Two whole universes … two whole space-time universes, stars, galaxies, countless planets—differing in a single detail, and of course in the consequences afterward—Except it isn't like that, really. These universes have always been distinct, from the beginning. It's just that this is the first point where the differences between them get noticeable. Besides, we haven't got merely two universes. Nobody's proved, in my world, whether there's an infinity of them, or whether the number's finite but enormous—N factorial, to be exact, where N is the total number of matter and energy particles that exist… . You can picture the cosmoses as lying parallel to each other, like the leaves in a book. That isn't strictly true, either; they occupy the same space-time, being separated by a set of dimensions—"

"Hold on, Valeria," said Holger. "Have pity. You're close to losing me overboard, and poor Rupert looks as if he's going down for the third time."

The girl relaxed and laughed at herself. "Sorry. You're right. Uh, Rupert, think of it this way. A lot of different worlds. Some almost the

same as yours, some totally alien to it. In some, for instance, there's a kingdom of England, A.D. 1644; in others the date is different; in still others, the kingdom never existed. Even the laws of nature may vary. What's possible in one world is not in another, and vice versa. You follow me?"

Rupert ventured a smile. "Through quicksands, marshes, brambles, rain, and night."

"And if a person knows how, he can cross between them," Valeria continued. "You savvy? After all, this is a pocket universe you're in."

Rupert drank deep. "At least its beer speaks comforting of home," he said to Taverner, "though sweeter, like a long-forgotten dream."

"I know what's sweeter, aye, a sugartit," Will whispered. He squeezed Clodia's hand. After a glance at oblivious Rupert and Holger, she gave a shrug, which quivered in numerous places, and fluttered her eyelids.

"You are from … elsewhere, Mistress… Matuchek?" Rupert asked. "That name is from Bohemia, like me."

"Elsewhere and elsewhen," she said, "though the words aren't especially meaningful in this context. That is, I don't belong to your future. I doubt if your world will look remotely like mine, by the time it reaches its own 1974. Certainly neither world of Holger's will."

Rupert stared at the Dane, who puffed his pipe before explaining in a diffident tone: "Well, you see, I'm a peculiar case. I belong—I was born in —a universe where the Carolingian myths are true. You know, Roland and Oliver and the rest."

"You're too modest," Valeria said.

"No, I just don't want this discussion to get worse complicated," he replied. To Rupert: "Never mind how, I got cast into an altogether different time-line—a time-line where magic doesn't work, except maybe in areas like ESP—oh, again, never mind. I'm trying to find my way home. I have had nothing to go on except a spell which carries me through space-time barriers, all right, but doesn't have any direction to it. After a lot of mishaps—the last was with a clutch of Aztec gods, and I barely escaped in one piece—I'd picked up enough assorted hints and clues that I could fumble myself to this inn. By my good luck, Miss Matuchek was here."

"I don't believe that was pure coincidence," Valeria said. "However, let's skip that. The point is, Rupert —Holger's twentieth century and mine are quite alike, rationalistic, industrialized, the Western countries mostly

democratic. Only they're quite unlike, also. For instance, in both of them, the USA and Germany were on opposite sides in the First World War. But his Second World War, that he fought in himself, was against Germany too—and Japan and Italy—while mine, that my parents fought in, was against the Saracen Caliphate. I suppose the differences were mainly due to paraphysical forces. Either they're as weak in that adopted cosmos of Holger's as he thinks, or else nobody there has discovered how to degauss the effects of cold iron, as they did in my world about 1900."

"Anyway," Holger said, "on her Earth they've made a science and technology of magic—"

"Paraphysics," she corrected. "Or the Art, if you prefer."

"Whatever. She's being very nice to me, giving me some valuable pointers. Maybe she can do the same for you, Mister—Herr—uh, Prince Rupert."

"Perhaps," Valeria said dubiously. "A lot would depend on your background. Is it science-oriented like mine? How much math do you know? That kind of thing." She braced herself with a drink before adding: "Also, to tell the honest truth, I'd want more information about you. No offense intended, but you could be serving some cause I'd think it was wrong to help."

"Or maybe I would not take help from you," Rupert snapped. "What are you doing here, in boy's disguise?"

Valeria smiled. "My, you really are from a different milieu! Well, I don't mind explaining, if the explanation will make any sense to you. In my home, this is perfectly ordinary female dress for a rugged outing. And as for my purpose, I'm on a field trip, collecting material for a master's thesis. It's not so long ago that people in my universe first managed to cross into others. We're still measuring the parameters—"

"How lawful are your thaumaturgic arts?" Rupert demanded.

She bridled. "Completely legal."

"Wait, I think I see what he's after," said Holger. "You remember, Valeria: I told you how in my world, the Carolingian one, that is, elves are mostly enemies to man. Maybe something like that is true for Rupert."

The girl spent a moment thinking, before she nodded at the prince. "Okay. Listen, please. Where I come from, there's nothing inherently good or bad about the Art. It involves a set of forces. We can use them morally or evilly, wisely or stupidly, same as anything else. Why, my father's a

were-wolf, my mother's a witch, and they're two of the dearest people you'll ever meet. Some of my best friends are halflings."

Rupert had likewise invested time in thought. "I pray your pardon, Mistress Matuchek," he responded. "I stand myself in debt to Oberon." (She started, and gave most intent attention to his speech.) "This ring I have of him and of his queen—and from one other—led me here tonight. Ere then, I'm told, its brilliance blossomed high, as we approached that steam train which we seized and drove this day from Yorkshire into Wales."

"Now, wait a little," Holger protested. "Oberon I know something about; *ja*, the English Civil War too—in fact, I seem to remember reading about a Prince Rupert who was in it—but steam trains?"

Valeria leaped up. She shivered in body and voice. "Hold it! I may be onto this paradox. Gimme a minute, will you?"

Her pacing shoes clacked beneath the crackle and rumble of fire. Its light wove through candle-gleam, soft over Rupert's tautness, Holger's puzzlement, Taverner's glittering-eyed observation.

Will nudged Clodia. "Mesim a taele'll shortly start to wag what I know well, an' would but brush thee off," he murmured. "We got a common language, thou an' I. 'Tis oanly partly spoaken with tha tongue. What zay we steal away an' practice it?"

Valeria whirled. Her finger stabbed at Rupert. "You talked about Hamlet and Macbeth—as if they were both real," she cried. "Contemporaries, even. You said you'd met Oberon and … Titania … yourself. Well, did Romeo and Juliet ever live? King Lear? Falstaff? Othello? You mentioned cannon in Hamlet's time. How about, by God, how about a University of Wittenberg already then? Did they have clocks that struck the hour in Julius Caesar's days? Was Richard the Third really a hunchbacked monster? Did Bohemia ever have a seacoast? Does withcraft work?"

To each flung question Rupert nodded, as if these were blows hurled upon him.

"Okay, then"—Valeria tensed—"do you know the name William Shakespeare?"

"Of course," Rupert said dazedly. "He was the great Historian."

"That's it!" Valeria turned to Holger. "If, if you could start in a world … where the Carolingian romances are the literal truth … why not the

plays of Shakespeare?" she stammered. "It figures, it figures. They'd've been technologically a little ahead of my world since an early period—though just in certain areas—still, their Industrial Revolution commencing in the seventeenth century, and maybe getting tied in with Puritanism—" Swinging back: "Oh, Rupert, we've got so much to talk about!"

Holger shook his head. "I think I better go work those problems from the textbook you gave me," he said.

"Of course. Poor dear. I'll come help you later on." She stooped to brush her lips across his forehead. "But I've *got* to talk to Rupert as well. Don't you see? Besides Shakespeare being an idol of mine, I always had sympathy for the Cavaliers. Maybe that was schoolgirl romantics; and anyhow, the issues may not be identical in Rupert's home. I doubt very much he could absorb the kind of instruction you're getting. But at least, I must have a certain hindsight over his period. It's possible I can counsel him, influence events a tiny bit for the better. I feel obliged to try."

Will climbed to his feet, Clodia undulated to hers. "Beg pardon, loard," the dragoon said. "Thou wilt not need me moare?"

It took Rupert a second to pull his mind their way. Then he grinned a trifle, rose, and bowed. "I must not," he responded. "Ladies e'er go over princes."

"But … princes … they go over commoners," said Will reluctantly; for Clodia was thrusting curves at his master.

Rupert clapped the soldier's back. "And commoners o'er ladies, on this night. Myself, I'll be discoursing till the dawn. May weariness not soften hardihood."

"Nay, zir, I be quiate firm in my resolve." Will took the woman around her waist. She sighed toward Rupert. His look had returned to Valeria and Holger. Clodia snuggled against the man she had. They slipped upstairs.

Holger voiced a harsh chuckle and sought his books. Valeria and Rupert settled themselves for conversation. The landlord listened.

EPILOGUE

They were many gathered this evening, to sit before the innkeeper's fire, enjoy his food and drink and regale him with their tales. Valeria Matuchek leaned against the bar, a pint in her fist, the better to oversee

them. A few she recognized, or thought she did—brown-robed monk at whose feet lay a wolf, gorgeously drunk Chinese from long ago whose calligraphic brush was tracing a poem, rangy fellow nearby whose garb was hard to place but who bore a harp, large affable blond man in high boots and gray leather with an iridescent jewel on his wrist, lean pipe-smoking Victorian and his slightly lame companion, wide-eyed freckle-faced boy and Negro man in tatterdemalion farm clothes, coppery-skinned feather-crowned warrior who held a calumet and a green ear of maize—but of the rest she was unsure. Several were not human.

Being impatient to hear everything that could be spoken and translated before they must depart, she finished her turn rather hastily:

“Yes, I came back through that universe, and spent a while learning how things worked out. Earlier, I’d gone to history books elsewhere, for background. Evidently this had to be the time-line where the romantic reactionaries do better than any when else. And… *this* Charles the First was either a wise man from the beginning, or chastened by experience. “

She shrugged. “I’m not sure how much difference it’ll make in the long run. In my history, Prince Rupert—well, he didn’t simply help invent the mezzotint, he became a scientist, a sponsor of explorations, a founder of the Royal Society…. I don’t think that in any cosmos he’ll sit smug on his victories. And they’ve got a new world a-borning there too, the real New World, the machine—science itself, which matters more; reason triumphant, which matters most—no stopping it, because along with the bad there’s too much good, hope, challenge, liberation—

“Well. ” She drained her tankard and held it out for a refill. “Nothing ever was forever, anyway. Peace never came natural. The point is, it can sometimes be won for some years, and they can be lived in.

“Enough. I hope you’ve enjoyed my story. “

HOUSE RULE

That inn beyond every world, the Old Phoenix, first appeared in my Shakespearean fantasy novel *A Midsummer Tempest*. Elsewhere I have acknowledged "its relationship to works by John Kendrick Bangs, Charles Erskine Scott Wood, Hendrik Willem van Loon, Lord Dunsany, Edmond Hamilton, and others, as well as the origin of all in a common daydream." It also commemorates certain cheerful pubs, here and there around the globe. Still, to the best of my knowledge, nothing else is quite like this place, where you may meet anybody whatsoever. I have returned to it a couple of times and hope to do so again.

-o-o-O-o-o-

Look for it anywhere, anytime, by day, by dusk, by night, up an ancient alley or out on an empty heath or in a forest where hunters whose eyes no spoor can escape nonetheless pass it by unseeing. Myself, I found its doorhandle under my fingers and its signboard creaking over my head when I was about to enter the saloon of a ship far at sea. You cannot really seek this house; it will seek you. But you must be alert for its fleeting presence, bright or curious or adventurous or desperate enough to enter, the first time. Thereafter, if you do not abuse its hospitality, you will be allowed to come back every once in a while.

The odds are all against you, of course. Few ever get this chance. Yet, since nobody knows what basis the landlord has for admitting his guests, and when asked he says merely that they are those who have good stories wherewith to pay him, you too may someday be favored. So keep yourself open to everything, and perhaps, just perhaps, you will have the great luck of joining us in that tavern called the Old Phoenix.

I'm not quite sure why the innkeeper and his wife the barmaid think I deserve it. There are countless others more worthy, throughout the countless dimensional sheaves, whom I have never met. When I suggest such a person, mine host shrugs, smiles, and amiably evades the question, a tactic in which he is skilled. Doubtless I've simply not happened on some of them. After all, a guest may only stay till the following dawn. Then the house won't reappear to him for a stretch which in my case has always

been at least a month. Furthermore, I suspect that besides being at a nexus of universes, the hostel exists on several different space-time levels of its own.

Well, let's not speculate about the unanswerable. I want to tell of an incident I can't get out of my mind.

That evening would have been spectacular aplenty had nothing else gone on than my conversation with Leonardo da Vinci. I recognized that tall, golden-bearded man the instant he stepped into the taproom and shook raindrops off his cloak, and ventured to introduce myself. By and large, we're a friendly, informal bunch at the Old Phoenix. We come mainly to meet people. Besides, of the few who were already present, nobody but landlord, barmaid, and I knew Italian. Oh, Leonardo could have used Latin or French with the nun who sat offside and quietly listened to us. However, their accents would have made talk a struggle.

The goodwife was busy, pumping out beer for Erik the Red, Sancho Panza, and Nicholas van Rijn, interpreting and chattering away in early Norse, a peasant dialect of Spanish, and the argot of a spacefaring future, while now and then she helped herself to a tankardful. Mine host, among whose multiple names I generally choose Taverner, was off in a dim corner with beings I couldn't see very well, except that they were shadowy and full of small starlike sparkles. His round face was more solemn than usual, he often ran a hand across his bald pate, and the sounds that came from his mouth, answering those guests, were a ripple of trills and purrs.

Thus Leonardo and I were alone, until the nun entered and shyly settled down at our table. I include medieval varieties of French in my languages; being an habitue of the Old Phoenix mightily encourages such studies. But by then we two were so excited that, while we greeted her as courteously as Taverner expects, neither of us caught her name, and I barely noticed that within its coif her face was quite lovely. I did gather that she was from a convent at Argenteuil in the twelfth century. But she was content to sit and try to follow our discourse. Renaissance Florentinian was not hopelessly alien to her mother tongue.

The talk was mainly Leonardo's. Given a couple of goblets of wine to relax him, his mind soared and ranged like an eagle in a high wind. Tonight was his second time, and the first had naturally been such a stunning experience that he was still assimilating it. But the drink at our inn, like the food, is unearthly superb. (It should be; Taverner can ransack

all the worlds, all the ages of a hyper-cosmos which, perhaps, is infinitely branched in its possibility-lines.) Leonardo soon felt at ease. In answer to a question, he told me that he was living in Milan in the year 1493 and was forty-one years old. This squared with what I recollected; so quite likely he was the same Leonardo as existed in my continuum. Certainly, from what he said, he was at the height of his fame, brilliance, powers, and longings.

"But why, Messer, why may you not say more?" he asked. His voice was deep and musical.

"Maybe I could," I replied. "None has ever given me a hard and fast catalogue of commandments. I imagine they judge each case singly. But . . . would *you* risk being forever barred from this place?"

His big body, richly clad though in hues that my era of synthetic dyes would have found subdued, twisted around in his chair. As his glance traveled over the taproom, I caught the nun admiring his profile—the least bit wistfully? She was indeed beautiful, I admitted to myself. A shapeless dark habit of rather smelly, surely heavy and scratchy wool could not altogether hide a slim young figure; her countenance was pale, delicately sculptured, huge-eyed. I wondered why, even in her milieu, she had taken vows.

The room enclosed us in cheer, long, wide, wainscotted in carven oak, ceiling massively beamed. A handsome stone fireplace held a blaze of well-scented logs, whose leap and crackle gave more warmth than you'd expect, just as the sconced candles gave more light. That light fell on straight chairs around small tables, armchairs by themselves, benches flanking the great central board, laid out ideally for fellowship. Along the walls, it touched books, pictures, and souvenirs from afar. At one end, after glowing across the bar where my lady hostess stood between the beer pumps and the racked bottles and vessels, it lost itself beyond an open doorway; but I made out a stair going up to clean, unpretentious chambers where you can sleep if you like. (People seldom do. The company is too good, the hours too precious.) Windows are always shuttered, I suppose because they would not look out over any of the worlds on which the front door opens, but onto something quite peculiar. That thought makes the inside feel still more snug.

"No," Leonardo sighed, "I daresay I too will grow careful. And yet. . .'tis hard to understand . . . if we are mainly here for colloquy, that Messer

Albergatore may enjoy the spectacle and the tales, why does he set bounds on our speech? I assure you, for instance, I do not fear your telling me the date and manner of my death, if you know them. God will call me when He chooses."

"You utter a deep truth there," I said. "For I am not necessarily from your future. For all we can tell, I may be from the future of another Leonardo da Vinci, whose destiny is, or was, not yours. Hence 'twould be a pointless unpleasantness to discuss certain matters."

"But what of the rest?" he protested. "You bespeak flying machines, automatons, elixirs injected into the flesh which prevent illness—oh, endless wonders—Why must you merely hint?"

I said into his intensity: "Messer, you have the intellect to see the reason. If I gave you over-much knowledge or foresight, what might ensue? We lack wisdom and restraint, we mortals. Taverner has a—a license?—to entertain certain among us. But it must strictly be entertainment. Nothing decisive may happen here. We meet and part as in dreams, we at the Old Phoenix."

"What then can we do?" he demanded.

"Why, there are all the arts, there are stories real and imaginary, there are the eternal riddles of our nature and purpose and meaning, there are songs and games and jests and simply being together—But it is wrong that I act pompous toward you. I feel most honored and humble, and would like naught better than to hear whatever you wish to say."

Humanly pleased, he answered, "Well, if you'll not tell me how the flying machine works—and, indeed, I can understand that if you did, 'twould avail me little, who lack the hoarded lore and instrumentalities of four or five hundred years—pray continue as you were when I interrupted. Finish relating your adventure."

I reminisced about a flight which had been forced down above the Arctic Circle, and how some Eskimos had helped us. His inquiries concerning them were keen, and led him on to experiences of his own, and to remarks about the variety and strangeness of man—As I said, had nothing else happened, this would still have been among the memorable evenings of my life.

The door opened and dosed. We heard a footfall, caught a whiff of city streets which also served as garbage dumps and sewers, glimpsed crowded wooden houses on a cloudy day. The man who had appeared was

rather short by my standards or against Leonardo, and middle-aged to gauge by features deeply lined though still sharply cut. Grizzled brown hair fell past his ears from under a flat velvet cap. He wore a monastic robe, with rosary and crucifix, but shoes and hose rather than sandals. His form was slender and straight, his gaze extraordinarily vivid.

Taverner excused himself from his conversation and hurried across the floor to give greeting. "Ah, welcome, welcome anew," he said in Old French—*langue d'oil*, to be exact. "At yonder table sit two gentlemen whose companionship will surely pleasure you." He took the monk's arm. "Come, let me introduce you, my learned Master Abelard—"

The nun's voice cut through his. She surged to her feet; the chair clattered behind her. "Pier!" she cried. "0 Jesu, 0 Maria, Pier!"

And he stood where he was for an instant as if a sword in his guts had stopped him. Then: "Heloise," cracked out his throat. "But thou art dead." He crossed himself, over and over. "Hast thou, thou, thou come back to comfort me, Heloise?"

Taverner looked disconcerted. He must have forgotten her presence. The noise and dice-casting at the bar died away. The starry gray ones became still. Alone the hearthfire spoke.

"No, what art thou saying, I, I am alive, Pier," the nun stammered. "But thou, my poor hurt darling—" She stumbled toward him. I saw how he half flinched, before he gathered courage and held out his arms.

They met, and embraced, and stood like that: until our plump, motherly barmaid suddenly shouted, "Well, good for you, dears!" They didn't notice, they had nobody but each other.

The rest of us eased a trifle. Evidently this wasn't a bad event. Erik lifted his drinking horn, Sancho guffawed at such behavior of ecclesiastics, van Rijn held out his mug for a refill, the strangers in the corner rustled and twinkled, Taverner wryly shrugged.

Leonardo leaned across the table and whispered to me, "Did I hear aright? Are those in truth Heloise and Abelard?"

"They must be," I answered, and knew not what to feel. "Belike not from your history or mine, however."

He had grasped the idea of universes parallel in multi-dimensional reality, in some of which magic worked, in some of which it did not, in some of which King Arthur or Orlando Furioso had actually lived, in some of which he himself had not. Now he murmured, "Well, quickly, lest we

say unwitting a harmful thing, let's compare what our chronicles tell about them."

"Peter Abelard was the greatest Scholastic of his century," ran from me, while I tried to take my eyes off the weeping pair and could not. "He was in his forties when he met Heloise, a girl in her twenties. She was the niece and ward of a powerful, high-born canon. They fell in love, had a child, couldn't marry because of his career in the Church but—Anyway, her uncle found out and was enraged. He hired a gang of bullies to waylay Abelard and castrate him. After that, Heloise entered a convent—against her uncle's wish, I believe—and never saw her lover again. But the bond that held them was unchanged—the world will always remember the letters that passed between them—and in my day they lie buried together."

Leonardo nodded. "Yes, that sounds like what I read. I seem to recall that they did marry, albeit secretly."

"Perhaps my memory is at fault."

"Or mine. It was long ago. For us. God in Heaven, though, they two yonder—!"

Maybe they consciously recalled this was the single place they could meet; or maybe they, like most people in their age, had scant notion of privacy; or maybe they didn't give a damn. I heard what they blurted forth through their tears.

They were from separate time-lines. She might belong to Leonardo's or mine, if ours were the same; her story was familiar to us both. But he, he was still a whole man. For him, three years before, she had died in childbirth.

Meanwhile Taverner led them to an offside couch; and the barmaid fetched refreshments, which they didn't see; and host and hostess breathed to them what no one else could hear. Not that anybody wanted to. As if half ashamed, they at the bar returned to their boozing, Leonardo and I to our talk; they in the corner waited silent.

My companion soon lost his embarrassment. Tender-heartedness is not notably a Renaissance trait. Since we knew equally little about the branchings of existence, we were free to wonder aloud about them. He got onto constructing such a world-of-if (suppose Antony had triumphed at Actium, because the library at Alexandria had not caught fire when Julius Caesar laid siege, and in it were Heron's plans for a submersible warcraft .

. well, conceivably, somewhere among the dimensions it *did* happen) that I too, chiming in here and there, well-nigh lost awareness of the nun and her Schoolman.

Again the door interrupted us—half an hour later, an hour, I'm not sure. This time I spied a lawn, trees, ivy-covered red brick buildings, before it shut. The man who had arrived was old but stood tall, and much robustness remained to him. He wore an open-necked shirt, fuzzy sweater, faded slacks, battered sneakers. A glory of white hair framed the kind of plain, gentle, but thoughtful and characterful Jewish face that Rembrandt liked to portray.

He saw Heloise and Abelard together, and smiled uncertainly. "*Guten Abend*," he ventured; and in English: "Good evening. Maybe I had better not—"

"Ah, do stay!" exclaimed Taverner, hurrying toward him, while the eyes popped in van Rijn's piratical visage and my pulse ran wild.

Taverner took the newcomer by the elbow and steered him toward us. "By all means, do," he urged. "True, we've had a scene, but harmless, yes, I'd say benign. And here's a gentleman I know you've been wanting to meet." He reached our table and made a grand flourish. "Messer Leonardo da Vinci . . . Herr Doktor Albert Einstein. .. ." I suppose he included me.

Of course, the Italian had not heard of the Jew, but he sensed what was afoot and bowed deeply. Einstein, more diffident, nevertheless responded with similar grace and sat down amidst polite noises all around. "Do you mind if I smoke?" he asked. We didn't, so he kindled a pipe while the barmaid brought new drinks. Neither of my tablemates did more than sip, however, and I wasn't about to spoil this for myself by getting drunk the way they were doing over at the bar.

Besides, I must be interpreter. Einstein's Italian was limited, and of a date centuries later than Leonardo's, who had neither German nor English. I interpreted. Do you see why I will never risk my standing at the Old Phoenix?

They needed a while to warm up. Einstein was eager to learn what this or that cryptic notation of Leonardo's referred to. But Leonardo must have Einstein's biography related to him.

When he realized what that signified, his blue eyes became blowtorches, and I had trouble following every word that torrented from him. We thus got some pauses. Furthermore, occasionally even those chain

lightning minds must halt and search before going on. Hence, unavoidably, I noticed Heloise and Abelard anew.

They sat kissing, whispering, trembling. This was the sole night they could have, she alive, he his entire self —the odds against their ever chancing to meet here were unmeasurably huge—and what was allowed them, by the law of their hostel and the law of their holy orders? Tick, said a grandfather clock by the wall, tick, tick; here too, a night is twelve hours long.

Taverner scuttled around in the unobtrusive way he can don when he wants to. They started trading songs at the bar. The taproom is big enough that that doesn't annoy anyone who hasn't a very good ear; and Einstein and Leonardo, who did, were too engaged with each other.

What does the smile mean upon Mona Lisa and your several Madonnas?

Will you give to me again that melody of Bach's?

How did you fare under Sforza, how under Borgia, how under King Francis?

How did you fare in Switzerland, how against Hitler, how with Roosevelt?

What physical considerations led you to think men might build wings?

What evidence proves that the earth goes around the sun, that light has a finite speed, that the stars are also suns?

What makes you doubt the finiteness of the universe?

Well, sir, why have you not analyzed your concept of space-time as follows?

Taverner and the barmaid spoke low behind their hands. Finally she went to Heloise and Abelard. "Go on upstairs," she said through tears of her own. "You've only this while, and it's wearing away."

He looked up like a blind man. "We took vows," came from his lips.

Heloise closed them with hers. "Thou didst break thine before," she told him, "and we praised the goodness of God."

"Go, go," said the barmaid. Almost by herself, she raised them to their feet. I saw them leave, I heard them on the stairs.

And then Leonardo: "Doctor Alberto, you waste your efforts." He grimaced; the hands knotted around his goblet. "I cannot follow your mathematics, your logic. I have not the knowledge—"

But Einstein leaned forward, and his voice too was less than steady. "You have the brain. And, yes, a fresh view, an insight not blinkered by four centuries of progress point by point. . . down a single road, when we know in this room there are many, many. . . ."

"You cannot explain to me in a few hours—"

"No, but you can get a general idea of what I mean, and I think you, out of everybody who ever lived, can see where . . . where I am astray—and from me, you can carry back home—"

Leonardo flamed.

"No."

That was Taverner. He had come up on the empty side of our table; and he no longer seemed stumpy or jolly.

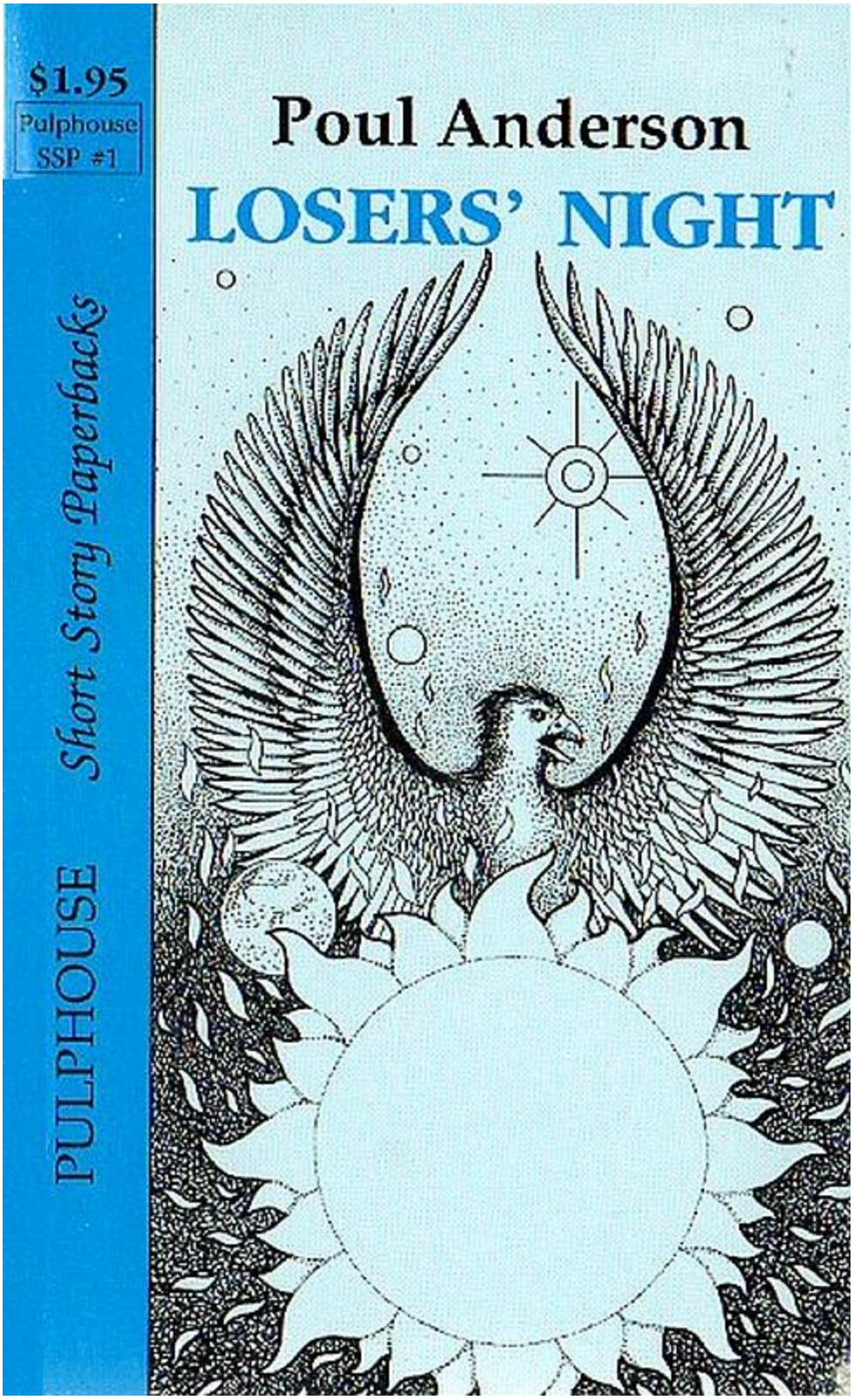
"No, gentlemen," he said in language after language. His tone was not stern, it was regretful, but it never wavered. "I fear I must ask you to change the subject. You would learn more than should be. Both of you."

We stared at him, and the silence around us turned off the singing. Leonardo's countenance froze. Finally Einstein smiled lopsidedly, scraped back his chair, stood, knocked the dottle from his pipe. Its odor was bittersweet. "My apologies, Herr Gastwirt," he said in his soft fashion. "You are right. I forgot." He bowed. "This evening has been an honor and a delight. Thank you."

Turning, his stooped form departed.

When the door had shut on him, Leonardo sat unmoving for another while. Taverner threw me a rueful grin and went back to his visiting mysteries. The men at the bar, who had sensed a problem and quieted down, now cheered up and grew rowdier yet. When Mrs. Hauksbee walked in, they cheered.

Leonardo cast his goblet on the floor. Glass flew outward, wine fountained red. "Heloise and Abelard!" he roared. "*They* will have had their night!"


$1.95
Pulphouse
SSP #1
PULPHOUSE
Short Story Paperbacks
Poul Anderson
LOSERS' NIGHT

LOSER'S NIGHT

This time the Old Phoenix appeared to me alongside a country road after dark. I was on the walk that most men take at least once in their lives, until sunrise, and no wish was in me for any society other than that of the stars. I almost passed the house by. Then I saw its fancifully carved beam ends in silhouette against Sagittarius. Astonishment and—not gladness, but hope brought me to a stop..

A while, though, I stood hesitant. The road ran wan through fields where dew glimmered and occasional trees caught starlight in their crowns. A breeze lulled cool, bringing odors of soil, growth, all our familiar earth. I never know what I will meet on those unforeseeable rare moments when the Old Phoenix is open to me. There will surely be no ready answers or easy solace. Nothing that happens in that nexus between the universes ever quite happens. When guests say goodbye and walk back out the door, it shall be like waking from a dream.

Yet some dreams leave a measure of understanding. Always on those evenings an extraordinary company is gathered. Mine host and hostess take their pay in the stories they hear told, the play of spirit upon spirit as they watch. Not humble, I nonetheless cannot imagine why they extend their hospitality to me. Certain things, such as life Itself, can only be accepted.

Did I decline, would they ever bid me return? That was not a risk to take. Besides, no matter how shaken I might be tonight, at least it should be out of this mood.

The inn might waver from sight at any instant. I scrambled through the ditch, grass rustling about my ankles, and up the low steps. The signboard creaked faintly overhead in the wind. The bronze of the elephant’s-head handle was cold to my touch, but when I pulled, the light that spilled forth was yellow and warm. I stepped through, closed the door behind me, and looked around.

The taproom is changeless, with oaken floor and wainscots beneath massive roofbeams. A fire crackles in a handsome stone fireplace. The mantel holds a giant hourglass and two seven-branched candlesticks. These and tapers sconced on the walls give better seeing than you would expect. Pictures and objects equally curious catch the eye more than do the

writing desk and bookshelves, which I suspect are more meaningful. A rear door leads to a corridor and staircase; upstairs are bedrooms, though few go to them and then only out of necessity. Another door admits savory odors from the kitchen. The mahogany bar, with its brass footrail and beer pumps, betokens the same homely comfort as does the battered furniture: a long table and numerous small ones surrounded by straightbacked chairs, some armchairs wherever the last users drew them.

About a score of people were present, mostly in small clusters. Like seeks like, or unlike seeks unlike, for comradeship or, seldom, quarrel. They were unwontedly quiet, I thought. Not that the Old Phoenix often gets noisy. Even when high spirits burst into song in a corner, it somehow doesn't trample over conversation in the manner of my world's accursed jukebox and never-to-be-sufficiently-damned television. But talk tonight seemed less animated than usual, smiles infrequent and acrid.

He whom I call Tavemer met me at the threshold. His own smile was as broad as always, his stocky frame at ease. Light reflected off the bald round head. "Hello," he said. "Welcome. How are you?"

Startled, I realized that he, who knows all languages, had not used mine. His was none I remembered ever hearing before, yet I had understood, my mind had rendered it into ordinary American English, but that was the tongue in which I stammered, "V-very happy to be here, thanks," for the strange words did not come to me.

His manner turned serious—not solemn, which I had never seen him be; it went deeper than that. "You'll find the rules are a little different this evening. Folks need to talk freely with each other, whomever they feel like."

I had sometimes wondered whether my limited abilities as an Interpreter were what gave me entry. They would not be required tonight. I was invited because of my need. The Taverners are as merciful as their charter, or whatever it is that was once granted them by some power unknown, allows them to be.

"On that account," he continued, "please don't ask anybody's name, or use it if you think you recognize a person." He smiled again. "Otherwise, relax, enjoy yourself." He stepped aside. However friendly, he had the trade to oversee and couldn't well stand chatting. I nodded and went on. As I passed him, a muscular hand clapped me on the shoulder.

His beer called. I headed for the bar. Glances trailed me, but no voices hailed. Self-introductions among so motley a lot are apt to be awkward. Those who want companionship soon find it regardless, with the individuals most appropriate.

My steps brought me close to a table where two men had settled. They were both lean, dark, somber. Through the machine-gun talking I identified classical Latin and Canadian French. They couldn't have spoken directly without the special dispensation.

"—battle tomorrow or the day after," said he in the toga. "At Philippi, I think. Harder will be what comes afterward, to restore the Republic."

He in the plaid shirt and faded blue work pants caught his breath. The wine slopped from the tumbler he clutched. He gaped at the other for a second before he rasped, "Are you—" He broke off. Self-control did not seem to come easily to him. "But no, I must not say it, eh?" He drank. His hand shook; more wine ran down the stubble on his chin. "And I am not learned anyway, I am only a simple *métis*."

"You should return to your country," said the Roman. "Your people need you."

Intensity still hotter than his burned in the eyes across from him. "They cry for justice, by God, and it is to me they cry—"

I shivered, and then had gone out of earshot.

The bar was a haven. "Belly up, dearie," urged Taverner's wife behind it. Like him, she wore decent working-class clothes of seventeenth-century Europe, the garb in which I most commonly see them. Why, I haven't ventured to ask. As likewise was her custom, she addressed me in the style of a music hall barmaid from about the year when I was born. "A nice pint or two, that's wot yer need." She worked a pump. The gray bun waggled at her nape.

"And a shot of Tanqueray, if you please," I requested. Her shelves are small, but somehow she can produce anything you ask for.

"Right-o. 'Ere yer be." Mug and glass slid across the wood. "Ow's the weather at 'ome?"

I shrugged. "Summer." The gin cast its sharp benediction over palate and gullet. The ale surged mightily after.

She cocked her head. "Yer weren't noticing, were yer?"

"Why should I?"

The smile faded on her plump plain countenance. "Three score and ten summers, the Book says. I should think yer couldn't afford ter waste none."

"Sometimes it can't be helped. But I don't want to cry on your shoulder."

"Cor! It'd be wringing wet if they orl did that ternight. Just look at 'em." She patted my hand. "Not that I ain't got sympathy, ducks. I wish we 'ad a nice girl for yer to pass the time with. But I'm afraid none o' these ladies 'ud do. I'm sure yer'll find some matey chap, though." She peered beyond me. "Scuse, I see a gentleman wot could do with a refill."

"Me first, if you please," said a male voice at my side. The man employed English too, in his case with a hint of Irish lilt. He didn't look especially Irish, long-faced, neatly bearded, outfitted with frock coat, waistcoat, necktie, watch chain, upper-class appurtenances of the late nineteenth century. However, his lapel bore a green ribbon.

"Right-o." Taverner's wife drew his stein full of the same splendor I savored. From beneath the bar she got a bowl of ice and tongs, which she placed on a tray with a bottle of yellow-green liquor and a carafe of water. She bustled off.

Meanwhile the Irishman tipped mug to mouth, wiped foam from his mustache, and gave me a wry smile. "Pardon me, I happened to overhear," he said. "I daresay you know we're rather free in this place. Woman trouble?"

I felt no offense. He appeared to be one sheet in the wind, no more, but he carried it well and what he showed was less curiosity than kindliness. "In a way," I admitted. "Not as simple as I wish it were."

"Sure, is it ever?" Abruptly he winced. "What when you get her, but the cost is all else you ever lived for?"

"Hm?"

"Kitty—No." He stiffened. "My apologies, sir. I ought not have spoken. Now, if you will pardon me again, I should return to my tablemate."

"Oh, yes."

Did he think I felt rebuffed? "I would invite you to join us, were we not discussing reform politics." Passion flickered. "The restoration of justice in the teeth of timocracy—" It died down. "I suspect you would not care to do so."

"No," I agreed. "Thanks anyway."

A prickling in my spine, I watched him go back. The other man wore a classic Greek tunic and sandals, of a simplicity that made me guess he was a Spartan. The drink before him looked like diluted wine, and he took it slowly, with a bite off a crust of bread between sips, although in the Old Phoenix you can drink at a rate that would be disastrous anywhere else. His bearing suggested one used to command, such as a king, but a deep inward weariness blunted it, close to despair.

I thought it would indeed be worth listening to them, and then decided the first one had been right and it would not be wise.

My gaze ranged about the taproom. The guests were as wildly diverse as ever. Uniquely in my experience, only three or four were female. The lives of women may generally be quieter than those of men, but not the less interesting or important; and when they do get spectacular—Hatshepsut, Jingo Kogo, Gunnhild, Britomart, Sacajawea, Moll Flanders, Sojourner Truth, Valeria Matuchek, on and on and on—they make my sex look tame. What was it most of them lacked?

For a moment I thought I'd found my partner. From pictures I knew that rugged Edwardian Englishman. But no; I didn't wish to hear his dreams; I would be remembering the ice and hunger in which they must end. And what awaited the dark man in a form-fitting glittery coverall with whom he conversed?

Of course, for these it might be otherwise. Space-time is many-branched, perhaps infinitely so. There seems to be little we can imagine which is not reality somewhere among yonder histories. Out of them, into the Old Phoenix for a night, have come—I have heard, or seen for myself—not only the likes of Theseus, Scheherazade, Falstaff, Holger Danske, Huck Finn, Irene Adler, Red Hanrahan, blind Rhysling—but a Zenobia who won free of Rome, an Abelard who remained a whole man, a Rupert of the Rhine who outfought Cromwell, a Tecumtha who preserved his nation—

I had no way of telling about any whom I now saw, unless I met them; and why should I lay remembrance of other vanquishments to mine? What were the Taverners doing? This was a house where the good cheer and the heartening rarely failed, and then through no fault of theirs. Had some darkness reached also into it?

My glance traveled past the fire, and my pulse hopped. A man sat by himself on the far side of it. I knew that scarecrow form and raven-gaunt face; I would have foreseen the soiled blouse and doublet, the patched, ill-fitting hose and shoes. We'd hoisted quite a few together, he and I, swapped verses and songs, tales and lies, ramshackle philosophies and smutty jokes. Okay!

I'd have to be a little careful. His temper could flare. I didn't imagine he would ever actually pull the dagger at his hip, not here, and certainly the landlord would never allow violence to be possible. Still, I'd heard of what happened when Kit Marlowe showed up in his presence—one of Taverner's few mistakes, letting two alley tom-cats into the same room—and I'd been on the receiving end of snakebite words myself. No matter. He got his mirth back equally fast, laughed, and called for another drink. On the whole, I am immensely pleased and proud that Francois Villon likes me.

I took my ale in his direction. Meeting me on her way back, the barmaid flashed a grin and a thumbs up. "That's right," she said, "toujours gai," which I didn't think was quite out of the role she likes to play.

It had little to do with the man she had served. He slumped alone in an armchair before the hearth, gripping his drink and staring into the flames. With a shock, I placed bony head, craggy nose, ruddy beard. He had both his ears. . . . "The light, the coals, like the sun." I don't know Dutch, but you can't mistake that hoarse language and under tonight's rules I heard what he mouthed. "White, Theo. All colors go up together in the white heat." Fireglow wavered across the blank blue of his eyes. I hadn't thought you could get this drunk in the Old Phoenix, no matter how much you gulped. Quite likely not. He had been born possessed. True, a whiff in the air told me it wasn't Pernod for him as I'd supposed, but absinthe.

I'd better assume that Mrs. Taverner knew her business, and go on past.

Villon sat shank over knee, chair tilted back against the wall, beaker set handy on a slab projecting from the side of the fireplace. He held a lute as scarred and battered as himself, from which he struck plangent chords. They weren't accompaniment but mere doodles of sound, keeping his fingers busy. He too looked fixedly at what I could not see, though in his eyes was a terrifying clarity. He wasn't singing, he was reciting, well-nigh too low to make out through the background of talk. Again I knew the

language, his, "the old nasal French," wrote Chesterton, which bears "the clang and groan of great iron." But the spell upon us tonight made it into English for me as well, whose lameness set beside the original caused me to flinch.

Bards may stand in a stately hall,
Praising the warrior's victory
Or wealth that is won and fame withal
By men of deeds or of artistry.
I will abide with the irony
That leaves blow sere when the wind harroos.
And epitaphs blur like memory.
Even the dead have much to lose.

He stopped. His lips moved on, wordless. He was, then, composing. After a moment he scowled, shook his head, spat a foul oath—and noticed me.

At that he leaped to his feet. Had most men done so, the chair would have clattered down behind. He left it as a cat does. Feline also was the quickness with which I saw him check my name before it escaped. `Why, you!" he exclaimed instead. `What a futtering wonderful surprise! You're just in time to rescue me."

Wiry fingers caught my hand. It was an odd, writhing grip, like his clasp on a former occasion. My guess was that it tickled him to give innocent me the recognition sign of some thieves' den. "Get yourself a seat," he went on. "Tell me of your rascalities since last—or, failing any, your virtuous deeds, doubtless much more comical. As for my adventures, ah, first and foremost, the episode of the priest, the sailor, and her whom I call Minou!" He paused, considered me, and finished, "No, perhaps not that for you, not immediately. I might salt a wound, eh?"

He was too perceptive. In his kind of life, you have to be. "What do I rescue you from?" I asked fast.

"Annoyance. This bemerded ballade. I thought I had it—the ambiance, thick as smoke tonight, verses should come of themselves upon me, like pigeon droppings. But no. It drags, it clanks. Yet it has me by the heels, it will not let me go before I give it a form, a name. Diverting the

mind a while, that may improve the flow." Villon laughed. "At least let the wind of your words blow away the garbage clutter of my metaphors! Sit."

Well, I might get more help than I gave. I glanced about after a vacant chair. The nearest I saw was at a table occupied by two men. I went for it.

Inevitably, they caught my attention. Both seemed healthy in their later middle years, except that the European in the high stock and snug trousers of sometime around 1820 strained to see with eyes that were failing him. He sipped wine from a crystal goblet, so appreciatively that it must be a prime vintage, unlike the raw stuff Villon tossed down. The second nursed what I took to be a glass of fruit juice. He was clearly a Muslim, attired in a plain white kaftan, and I thought that the language in which he replied to his companion's French was Arabic. However, he himself was no Arab, being light of complexion and straight of nose. A North African, I guessed.

"—and thus the spirit of fellowship and obligation that the desert breeds revitalizes a civilization when the nomads enter into it," he was saying. "For its part, it refines them of the dross, it makes them fully human. But in the end it is fated that they in their turn become corrupt and enfeebled."

The Frenchman nodded. "Likewise among plants and animals," he responded. "I believe extinction falls upon a line as often because it changes itself all too well to fit the conditions about it as because it adapts too slowly. Nevertheless, monsieur, with respect, you overgeneralize. Human societies must be as capable as natural species of successful evolution into forms altogether new."

They were wholly caught by each other's ideas. Was such enjoyment peculiar to them this evening? "Excuse me, gentlemen," I said. "May I take the extra chair?"

Gentlemen in truth, they rose, bowed or salaamed, and assured me I was welcome. Thereupon they went straight back to their discussion. I half wished I could sit in on it.

"Yes, I think the next stanza is in ferment," said Villon as I returned. "Speaking of which, your health, old cock!" He raised his beaker and swallowed a draught. "May you soon win back your merriment."

I lowered myself, tasted my ale, and answered, "Did I say I'd lost it?" At once I realized my defensiveness was automatic. The ease of being able to speak English to him had its pitfalls.

"No, but I have seen flagellants cheerier than you. Moreover, this is a night for lives that failed."

"What?"

Villon swept his hand around in Gallic wise. "Only pay heed. Not that I can say who or what every soul among us is. But I see enough, enough."

Rebels, leaders, explorers—on what planet will the man in the garb that glitters perish, in what century?. . . "How can you identify any?" — you, expelled student, wastrel, brawler, robber, thief, jailbird, vagabond, and the devil knows what else, five centuries before my time in my world.

He shrugged. "One has the luck to be admitted here now and then. One gets sociable, drinks, eats, gambles a bit, talks, listens, watches, and, yes, thinks, if you can imagine that of me. Thus I have gleaned some sparrow's crumbs of history from other lands than France, in ages later as well as earlier than what I live through." He grinned. "It tempts to put them into my verses. But who would understand, at what passes me for home? I would rather not have witchcraft added to the accusations against me. So I fashion my variant songs in the Old Phoenix only, as occasion suggests them."

A cold gust made the fire jump and snap. Turning our heads, we saw the front door had opened again. Taverner was greeting a new arrival. We couldn't see past him to that person, but the entrance was full of gray fog and drizzle. I judged the time yonder to be near sundown of a winter's day in a northern land.

"Did he go forth into that weather because it matched his sentiments?" Villon wondered aloud. "Then he has need of comforting, him."

"Failures, did you say?" I challenged, for the implications were not pleasant. "Why on. . . earth. . . would the Taverners bring together a crowd of losers?"

"Well, many have lost, or will lose, in colorful ways. Observing them justify themselves to each other, that should amuse." There isn't much compassion in Villon's milieu, none in his part of it.

"No, wait," I protested. "The Taverners aren't the sort who—"

He raised his palm. "Hold." Mercurial, his attention had gone beyond the room, perhaps beyond this whole pocket universe. "I feel—yes, my second stanza, I have it."

Apparently an accompaniment was included, for he put his beaker aside, laid hand to strings, and chanted while the chords snarled underneath.

At Stamford Bridge did Harald the tall
Win him a grave as long as he.
Dick Crookback's hissed from a theater stall.
Lionheart beggared his monarchy.
Athenian men fared valiantly
To die in the quarries of Syracuse.
Bolivar cried he had plowed the sea.
Even the dead have much to lose.

The lute fell into his lap. He reached for the wine and knocked it back in a single gulp.

The newcomer approached. He had folded an umbrella, which he swung like a walking stick, and carried a bowler hat in his left hand, but drops glistened on tweed suit and Ascot tie. He was of sturdy medium height. An inward vigor and the rosiness that came from a lengthy tramp made it hard to guess his age, but thinning reddish hair suggested the mid-fifties. His nationality was never in doubt. That face would fit John Bull.

The breath whistled in between my teeth.

"Eh?" said Villon. "You know that fellow, do you?"

"I know of him," I whispered. "He—" Recollection. "Sorry, it'd be too hard to explain without letting names slip."

He accepted that. "Perhaps another evening, under a different rule of the house. Ohé, my cup is empty and yours has not far to go."

The Englishman reached the hearth, leaned umbrella against stone, laid hat on mantel, and held palms out to the fire. It wasn't arrogance, simply a lack of shyness. At first he scarcely noticed the Dutchman, whom I could not see from where I was and who kept silence. Despite the ample candlelight, I could trace flame-glow at play across his visage, and picture it on the other's.

Were they really that unlike, the healthy and the ravaged? Now that he was close, I saw the heaviness on the Englishman's mouth, the darknesses beneath and behind his eyes.

The barmaid hove into sight. "Wot'll it be, sir?" she asked him.

I glimpsed a forced smile. "You should know by now, my dear," he told her. "A large black coffee, if you please, and a larger cognac."

"Right, sir." She swung past us. "Yer ready too, ain't yer? Be straight back, loves."

As she pattered away, I turned to Villon and said very softly, "Failures? No, you're wrong. I tell you, he—Well, he's not."

The poet raised his brows. "Are you quite certain? I deem he has no more triumph in him than you do, my friend."

The subject of this ignored us, whom he saw peripherally, around the corner as we were. He looked down toward the Dutchman while he felt inside his jacket. "Do you mind if I smoke a cigar?" he inquired. The hand stopped short. Astonishment smote. "*You*."

"Me?" the other mumbled. "You know me, monsieur?" He had fallen into an accented French. It was what he mostly used, expatriate that he was.

"Why, of course, of course. That is—" John Bull gathered his wits. "I have seen your self-portraits. Sir, I am overwhelmed."

"What?" asked the vague, harsh voice. "You have seen them? Where? How?" With an effort: "Oh, yes. Things work differently here, don't they? Forgive me. This light is too dim."

"Most light is, isn't it?" murmured the Englishman. "Except in the Provençal summer."

I shouldn't eavesdrop. Not that Villon would have hesitated, but neither of those two had meaning for him; and he was, after all, my drinking buddy. Furthermore, I wanted to refute that disturbing idea of his. "Failures?" I repeated. "People whose dreams crashed to the ground? Can't be. I wouldn't call you a failure, for instance. They'll remember you while they remember Homer and Shakespeare."

He'd obviously acquired some knowledge of the latter. Had they met, maybe, when I was not present? That wasn't a thought to pursue. As somebody has remarked, envy is the single one of the seven deadly sins that gives no pleasure whatsoever.

"I disappear young from history," he answered coolly. "Knifed in a sordid little fight, hanged in a provincial town whose records burned in a later war or revolution, or what? Who knows? Who cared?"

Asking about your destiny isn't actually forbidden in our tavern, unless when a special rule like tonight's implies as much, but the

atmosphere discourages it. So does common sense. Regardless, Villon was bound to ferret out the story of himself.

"That doesn't follow, you know," I reminded him needlessly. "I've seen evidence your biographers have found, that you may have retired to safe obscurity and a ripe old age."

His laughter crowed. A lusty obscenity followed, to express his opinion of that evidence.

Knowing him, I agreed, and tried another tack. "Anyway, doubtless many of you exist, in many distinct histories. *This* Villon might well do better than the rest. In fact, if you don't, when you've been forewarned, you're a fool, and that's not the insult I'd choose for you."

His tone was almost flippant. "A fool and a fated man are not necessarily the same person. We do not what we should, but what we will, and devise fine reasons why that is what we must. Eh?" Once more he shrugged. "As for myself, I shall see."

I nodded toward the chevalier and the Berber. They had grown vibrant, waving their arms, talking into each other's mouths, ardent as lovers. "Those two are having a grand time. Infirmities aside, what's wrong with their lives?"

The barmaid reappeared. Her laden tray drew Villon's attention and thus perforce mine. The Englishman had pulled over an arm-chair that I had not noticed earlier, to settle opposite the Dutchman. I heard him: "I myself paint. Purely amateur. My landscapes are pretty, at best. But I should be honored if you would care to tell me—Ah, thank you, Mrs. Boniface, thank you."

As Villon took his own fresh vessel, I asked him, "Why do you drink that red vinegar?" Out of curiosity I had taken a single sip when first we met. "Here you could have the best that any of the worlds will ever know."

"But this I am used to," he said. "It makes going home at dawn easier." His smile gibed. "The proper appreciation of squalor and failure requires discipline."

"Damn it, you aren't—Well, what about the pair I mentioned? Do you happen to know anything about them?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. They aroused my inquisitiveness precisely because they seem exceptional. I spent an hour in the game at the table nearby, largely to keep an ear cocked toward them."

I glanced that way. Greasy cards were still in the hands of three shabby men and a sleazy-bright woman. Money lay strewn among the glasses. Tobacco smoke hazed their heads. Dresses, hair styles, features proclaimed them from various lands and eras. I wondered how such a drab, beaten lot had gotten in.

"Between what I heard and what threads of knowledge I had earlier unraveled from learned visitors, I won to a fair idea of who those two are," Villon continued. "No names at present, Monsieur Aubergiste requires. But I will hazard declaring that they rank with the greatest natural philosophers who ever lived. The Christian seeks to understand what drives the development of life, the infidel seeks to understand what drives the development of humanity. And they come close—so close! But they lack certain information that men will gain after their deaths, and all their majestic efforts go for nothing. Of course, they do not foresee that, and I'd not spoil their pleasure."

I had no ready response. Through the silence between us, from around the corner of the fireplace, cut the Dutchman's cry. "You have sold paintings, you say? Sold those things you dabble at? Do you know how many of mine have been bought in my entire lifetime? One."

The Englishman's voice was an instrument which he played like a master, in summons to battle or, now, to call down peace. "Yes, I know, sir. I have read. It is an intolerable shame. But don't blame the people of my day too much, I beg you. By then we have begun to comprehend a little of what you were doing, and treasure it. Nobody pretends that my canvases are any more significant than the bricklaying that also helps me pass my days. It is my name upon them that excites a bit of interest—a name that you have never heard, naturally, unless attached to an ancestor of mine." Brief roughness: "And, to be sure, I have some friends left. A few. They wish to encourage me."

"Yes, failure can be very subtle, very quiet," Villon said after a minute. "Yours, for example, I surmise." His look searched like a pickpocket's fingers. "A disappointment in love? But scarcely straightforward."

"I don't want to talk about it!" I snapped. What hurt too much was that I was not the worst hurt; and that is all I will ever care to say.

He leered above the rim of his beaker. "The physicians and the old wives agree that for every ill, nature provides a remedy. Often the old

wives know what some of those remedies actually are. Now let me prescribe. She playing cards and I have had our encounters before. I can introduce you without giving names, and then, if you will show a little enterprise—our host is tolerant and his hospitality goes far, you know. I assure you, in certain respects the wench is all else but a failure."

For an instant I was tempted, less by her than by her entire table. Speaking with them might teach me a minim of what a few writers (which, for these?) have known by instinct. . . . I decided against it. I really hadn't the heart to cultivate any new acquaintances, especially ones who in person were probably inarticulate.

Perhaps John Bull's words had entered my unconscious to breed that fleeting notion, for I grew aware of them.

"—writing. I can believe that's worth my doing, more than a pastime. History, biography, and, above all, warnings of what my countrymen must prepare against." He sighed. I visualized that heavy head shaking. "If they will only listen."

"Why should they not?" asked the artist. The personality before him must have drawn him a small ways out of his despair, and maybe out of his mad visions. "You said you have been a statesman."

"*They* call me a blundering ass. Many of them call me a murderer. You see, during the Great War I conceived the idea of—No matter. It failed, and thousands of young lives went down with it." Anguish yielded to stoicism. "Hence in due course I was rusticated." I saw a deep draught of brandy, a ferocious drag on the cigar.

It was my bladder that reminded me I had no business listening. I got up. "The expedition," I said. Villon nodded absently and laid hold of his lute. His look went beyond me anew.

The lavatory of the Old Phoenix, in the hall below the staircase, is so logically designed that it has to be from a later century than mine. My course toward it brought me close past a foursome who made my stride turn slow. For a reason obscure to me, they were the most striking in the whole assembly. Even the cadaverous Spaniard who had patched together a ridiculous armor, and the stunningly beautiful, imperially garbed Chinese lady for whom he attempted courtliness—even they grabbed at me less than these.

The white man and the woman close beside him were presumably wedded, for they were both dressed like subjects of the Ottoman Empire,

he in turban and robe, she veiled and trousered. Just the same, I didn't think they were Turks. The aquiline features above his beard suggested—not other Iberians, actually. Sephardim? He could have been in his forties, he could have been far older. May you and I never know such grief as had hollowed him out.

The second woman was of about that calendrical age. Physically she must live well, for her Tudor ruff, stomacher, gown were of the finest materials, though the dyes were somber, and jewels glittered on rings. But sorrow and ill health had given her the waxy pallor of those whose time grows short. She clutched a crucifix to her breast and obviously forced herself not to recoil from the second man.

"Jack Wilson," I heard him say. He had forgotten for the moment that he could dispense with English. His was quite fluent, in a slightly drawling dialect. "Can't give you my real name, that they know me by these days, but if you want a handle, then Jack Wilson is what the whites called me when I lived amongst them."

He was a Native American—from the Southwest, to judge by his looks. His shirt, vest, pants, bandana could have been on any ranch hand, except that the lower sleeves bore some kind of symbols and above them were armbands, each holding a feather. His hair fell to his shoulders.

The other man clenched a fist till I thought the skin might split over the knuckles. "Shall I give you the Islamic name I received?" he croaked. "Does the law of tonight's master allow that?" The veiled woman stroked his wrist. Her touch trembled.

Only through the power of the place could I know what he had said; and the English of the Tudor woman came near being a foreign language itself: "No matter names, until we lie dead and men open our hearts to see which are carved on them." She snatched her wine and drank in a single ragged motion.

"Would they truly do that in your land?" asked the American, dismayed. His mother tongue, unknown to me, brought a power akin to John Bull's into his voice. "Our ancestors will freely give us their names, their true and sacred names, when we have danced them home to us."

She tautened. Her lips drew thin. "Black necromancy, is it?" she hissed. "Are you fallen that deep in the toils of Satan?"

"No! It was God who spoke to me, on that day when the sun was darkened—"

My feet inexorably bore me out of hearing. I quickened them, and didn't linger in the washroom. On my way back, I slowed down again.

"Christ will receive you," the Tudor woman implored.

The man of the turban barked, whether in laughter or in pain. "I suppose we two can abjure yet another faith," he said, "if you will smuggle us to where it will not cost us our lives. But which Christ, my lady? Yours, the Lutherans', the Greeks', whose?"

"All roads up a mountain lead toward heaven," said the tribesman. "Let each walk the one his forefathers trod. On mine, I see their footprints in the dust before me, and in the wind I hear their ghosts singing the olden songs—"

A finger tapped my arm. Taverner had come this way after putting a fresh log on the fire. He beckoned. I followed him over to the wall.

"You really shouldn't listen in like that," he told me.

"I'm sorry," I blurted. "I didn't mean any harm."

He waited. His stance was amiable.

"Not to snoop or, or anything," I said. "I was just, well, fascinated and. . . chilled."

"Of course," he answered. "Ordinarily it's fine for our guests to mingle." He smiled. "In fact, we hope they will." Turning earnest: "But in this case, if you'd stuck around any longer they'd have noticed you, and it would have interrupted what's happening between them. Why don't you rejoin your friend?" Again a smile. "We've got a special brew on tap that you haven't sampled. It'll be waiting for you."

"Taverner," I asked desperately, "why are you doing this? What's it about? I never expected you'd bring people like these together. To watch them hurting? The losers, the damned—"

A frown crossed his bare brow. "Can you say who's damned and who's not? I wouldn't dare try." He clapped my shoulder, as when I had entered. "Go drink your ale."

I seized it upon my return. Villon hailed me eagerly. "I have my third stanza," he announced. Nodding sideways: "Some words between those two there gave me the idea. It seems your politician did not send men to die without having aforetime ridden in the van of combat himself. The painter liked that. So do I."

Strings clanged.

A yeoman defeated becomes a thrall,
Knowing his children shall not be free.
Whatever we build must break and fall
Under the hoofs of history.
Since naught can remain for posterity
But a name all honor and none abuse,
Who was the victor, Grant or Lee?
Even the dead have much to lose.

"That's a stark thing," I said.

"Why, I would call it mild." Thinking of others by him—the "Hanged," say—I had to grunt assent. "An envoi is still lacking," he added. "Well, let it come as it chooses. Tell me about your era's latest lunacies."

The next couple of hours have nothing to do with anybody but us two. Honest fellowship is a healer second only to love. Not that Francois Villon was ever a nice guy. Nor did I give him either of the names in my own heart. But we walked arm in arm down crooked lanes; he took me a-scramble over moonlit roofs, while showing him vistas of what I had seen opened my eyes to the wideness of them. His account of the priest, the sailor, and Minou was evilly poetic and unforgivably funny.

I could not help catching fragments of the talk at the fire.

"You are a brave man."

"I do not think I would have the courage to live with demons."

"Do I? Mine overrun me. I think in the end they will take me."

"You will have fought until the end."

"With what for weapon?"

"Your brush. And I swear, I promise, that what that wins for us, the gates of hell shall not prevail against."

The shutters stay closed over the windows of the Old Phoenix. I suspect nobody has ever inquired of Taverner what he would see through them. A grandfather clock in a corner ticks and ticks, booming at each hour. Its hands announce the dawn when the last guests must leave. As that drew near, I found that I no longer dreaded going home.

Life rang in the Dutchman's voice. "Then you find you are not broken?"

"After being in your company, sir," replied the Englishman, "how could I surrender?"

Taverner had come to stand unobtrusively nearby. Our glances crossed. He hesitated a moment before he stepped over to me. His words ran low and fast. "We've got to observe the restrictions, you know. You wouldn't want us to lose our license, would you?"

"God, no," I said.

Taverner made a fending gesture. "Not God. Absolutely no idea of that. But we do what we can, the wife and I. We do what we can."

The Englishman and the Dutchman had risen to shake hands. The movement brought them in full view of us. "An honor, sir, and an enlightenment," John Bull declared. "I trust we will have more encounters."

The painter's straightened shoulders slumped. He looked away. "Not for me, I think," he muttered in the tongue of his childhood. "Never and never."

The Englishman bit his lip, started to say something, thought better of it, and addressed the landlord instead. "Goodnight, good friend. Thank you for very much." He took hat and umbrella and stumped from us.

The painter stared after him. "Beware of darkness," I heard him say. "Everywhere darkness. No, the white sun and the huge stars—But what when they burn out? What then?"

He shook himself, cackled a laugh, tossed off his absinthe, and retreated from my sight, sinking back to look into the fire. For a while he had been almost happy.

Villon, who had watched, took the lute, strummed, and concluded his piece.

Christ, Prince of losers, behold how we
Are burning heretics, hanging Jews
In this thy name for the fear of thee.
Even the dead have much to lose.

I thought his mind had slipped back to his medieval realm, until I remembered what world it was whereon Winston Churchill now opened the door. The envoi sums up the entire ballade.

Table of Contents

contents
- A Midsummer Tempest
- House Rule
- Loser's Night